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Hidden Treason:

Aspects of the Protagonist's Action in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Skrytá zrada:

Aspekty činnosti hlavní postavy v Neviditelném Ralpha Ellisona

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):

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Abstract

From the very moment of its publication in 1952 *Invisible Man* by Ralph Waldo Ellison has been widely discussed by critics but, in my view, the Prologue did not receive due attention. In my thesis I am going to argue that it is exactly in the Prologue where the readers can see Invisible Man in full action, although he himself seems to overlook it even in the Epilogue, in which the protagonist is still uncertain about his future action. That is possible, for the tone of the whole novel suggests that the protagonist is not as insightful as he may think. Otherwise, if the Prologue is not there to show the readers that the protagonist is actually in full action, the purpose of the Prologue as a mere introductory piece seems to be redundant if one is to bear in mind that in the first paragraph of the first chapter the protagonist repeats the essential information of the Prologue, that is that he is invisible. In my thesis I am going to discuss the protagonist's action in the Prologue and how it serves the purpose of the entire novel, the key activity being the "fight against Monopolated Light & Power" which could be read on two levels: as straightforward civil disobedience and as symbolic artistic manifesto. The former concept is significant in the range of the whole novel and American tradition as well, and that would be closely scrutinized. The latter one was of great importance for Ellison himself as he agreed with Kenneth Burke who influenced his thought that art is action in itself.

After the nature of Invisible Man's activity would be discussed, I would proceed with its aims starting with the grandfather's advice which bore considerable influence on the protagonist's outlook. The fact that in the Prologue the advice is referred to only covertly makes it only more worthy of scrutiny, especially with the word "treason" showing up in the hallucination sequence — the word that appears not only in the advice but on several occasions in the novel, too. The question is what exactly that treason is against, and how Invisible Man participates in it, if he does, since in the end Invisible Man is all for justice and democracy. In my thesis I am going to connect all these concepts and goals with the help of Invisible Man's action in the Prologue.

Abstrakt

O románu Neviditelný Ralphe Ellisona se zeširoka diskutovalo hned od chvíle jeho publikování v roce 1952, ale podle mého názoru nezískal jeho Prolog patřičnou pozornost. V této bakalářské práci se chystám dokázat, že právě v Prologu čtenáři vidí Neviditelného jednat v plné míře, i když si toho hlavní postava zdánlivě nevšímá, a to dokonce ani v Epilogu, ve kterém je stálé nejistý ohledně svojí budoucí činnosti. Taková možnost existuje na základě toho, že hlavní hrdina není tak pronikavý, jak si myslí, což naznačuje tón celého románu. V opačném případě, pokud Prolog nemá projevit, že protagonista skutečně jedná, zdá se Prolog jako pouhý úvod zbytečný, víme-li, že v prvním odstavci prvé kapitoly hlavní hrdina klíčovou informaci Prologu opakuje, čili hovoří o své neviditelnosti. V své bakalářské práci se budu zabývat činností protagonisty v Prologu a její funkci v rámci románu. Klíčovou činností je "boj proti Monopolizovaným Světlu a Moci", což může být pojímáno dvojím způsobem: jako přímočará občanská neposlušnost a jako symbolické umělecké prohlášení. První jmenovaný pojem je důležitý v rámci románu i černošské tradice, a proto bude důkladně prozkoumán. Druhý pojem byl velice důležitý pro Ellisona osobně v důsledku díla Kennethe Burkea, jehož myšlenka, že umění je činnost sama, inspirovala Ellisonovy názory a tvorbu.

Po rozboru činnosti Neviditelného budu pokračovat v analýze jejích účelů, přišemž začnu dědečkovou radou, která značně ovlivnila protagonistův životní postoj. Tato rada je v Prologu zmíněná pouze skrytě, a proto zasluhuje podrobnější zkoumání, obzvláště když se během protagonistovych halucinací vyskytuje slovo "zrada", které se objevuje nejenom v radě, ale i c jiných částech románu. Otázkou je, proti komu je tato zrada mířená, zda se na ní Neviditelný podílí a případně jakým způsobem, když na konci románu Neviditelný zcela zastává demokracii. Ve své bakalářské práci hodlám propojit všechny uvedené pojmy a záměry pomocí činnocti Neviditelného, jak je popsana v Prologu.

Key words

Ralph Ellison, African-American literature, Civil disobedience, American Dream

Kličová slova

Ralph Ellison, Afroamerická literatura, Občanská neposlušnost, Americký sen

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I would also like to thank my dear friend Anna for her support.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Invisible Man by Ralph Waldo Ellison made an impact on the public from the very moment of its publication in 1952. It was deemed a huge success for a debut novel, albeit some reviewers, like Irving Howe, criticized it for "occasional pretentiousness of manner"[1] or for other misappplications of skill. Still, some such faults did not prevent a reviewer for the *New York Times* from claiming that *Invisible Man* was "the most impressive work of fiction by an American Negro which [he had] ever read"[2]. The author's ingenuity, the ever present tension of the narrative, the accurate use of idiom and the fact that the book is "shorn of the racial and political clichés that have encumbered the 'Negro novel'"[3] simply could not pass unnoticed.

The latter aspect — the lack of racial and political clichés — is not accidental; one may say that it is the core aspect of the novel, for Ellison had some strong objections to the so called "protest novel" of the 1930s. This matter may have been complicated for him, since he was a friend of Richard Wright, a famous representative of that kind of fiction; more than that, it was actually Wright who persuaded Ellison into writing. And because the connection between the authors is very well known, it seems inevitable to try to establish a connection between their works. Ellison himself did pay tribute to Wright in terms of his (Ellison's) getting to know the art of writing, yet did not consider Wright his "spiritual father"[4] — quite on the contrary. Ellison wrote his novel partly in opposition to those of his friend: he felt that the image of a Negro in Wright's novels, among others of a similar tone, was adjusted to the ideological cause and thus lost its authenticity. He went as far as to say that he preferred to admire Wright the person, not Wright the writer, because he (Wright) "could not for

[1] Irving Howe, Review of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, *The Nation* (May 10, 1952) 31 May 2007 http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/howe-on-ellison.html, 10 Aug 2015.
[2] Orville Prescott, Review of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, *The New York Times* (April 16, 1952) https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/20/specials/ellison-invisible2.html, 10 Aug 2015.
[3] George Mayberry, Review of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, *New Republic* (1952) https://newrepublic.com/article/114842/george-mayberry-ralph-ellison-invisible-man, 10 Aug 2015.
[4] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995) 117.

ideological reasons depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself"[5]. Ellison saw African American experience as something rich and beautiful — despite all the difficulties of life that were caused by the political system of the country — and African Americans in no way inferior to whites. The very doubt of somebody's humanity appeared absurd to him, especially on the basis of skin colour. Still, he felt that too many Black writers contemporary to him addressed themselves to the white audience: "By doing this the authors run the risk of limiting themselves to the audience's presumptions of what a Negro is or should be; the tendency is to become involved in polemics, to plead the Negro's humanity"[6]. These limitations, Ellison believed, cast real, as opposed to fictional, African Americans out of the discourse, not to say the reality, made them "mere abstraction[s] in somebody's head"[7], thus robbing them of their selfhood.

In this respect *Invisible Man* builds up primarily as a search for one's self and his place in the world; and exactly this search helps the narrator to develop his worldview in terms of society and politics which becomes the ideological content of the text — not vice versa. All the main points seem to be distilled in the Epilogue, one of the two framing parts of the narrative; and exactly this part became the subject of numerous papers written on *Invisible Man*, namely the conclusions drawn there. At the very same time the other framing part, the Prologue, appears to be almost completely overlooked. Clearly, as with any prologue, it is an introductory piece, its two main statements being the invisibility of the narrator and his urge to write his autobiography. Ellison himself explained its function as "a foreshadowing" that should "throw the reader off balance — make him accept certain non-naturalistic effects"[8]. Still, it is hard not to notice some redundancy there, for in the first paragraph of the first chapter the protagonist's words "[b]ut first I had to discover that I am an invisible man"[9] not

[5] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 120.
[6] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 170.
[7] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 112.
[8] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 178.
[9] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 17.

only repeat that he is invisible but also anticipate what the story is about, that is how he has come to such a conclusion. Would it not have been more expedient, if such a word may be used regarding literary form, to somehow "throw the reader off balance" there, without writing a separate piece? Moreover, in the Epilogue the narrator explains why he decided to write down his story, thus making the Prologue somewhat redundant again. Bearing all that in mind one cannot but wonder if there could be any other purpose to the Prologue.

To find out what that purpose might actually be, it may be a reasonable way to start with comparing the Prologue and the Epilogue that frame the narrative. Chronologically they are consequent, both of them take place in "the hole", that is in the coal cellar, Invisible Man's dwelling, — and yet they are a whole narrative distant from each other. They appear to be on the extremes of the spectrum not only in terms of the structure of the text but in terms of the tone as well: the Prologue sounds bitter and desperate whereas the Epilogue is calm and optimistic. This contrast is underlined by the narrator's attitude towards social responsibility which he explicitly rejects in the opening piece and embraces in the closing one. Yet there is one more feature that distinguishes the two: the Prologue is descriptive, the reader has the opportunity to glimpse into "the hole" and into Invisible Man's life while he is in his "hibernation", and the Epilogue is more of an essay, even the encounter with Mr Norton simply serves as an example to the narrator's thoughts. It is exactly this difference that might catch one's eye concerning Invisible Man's desire — to take action, as the Prologue describes exactly his actions, in the underground if nowhere else.

The matter with which the present thesis is concerned is the nature of Invisible Man's action during his "hibernation", primarily on the basis of the Prologue. It is to be scrutinized in a straightforward way — that is, what his actual actions are and what impact they can have on his immediate circumstances (Chapter I), and in the way of symbolic reading of his activity (Chapter II). The latter aspect is apparently the more important of the two because it belongs to the realm of culture and creativity; cultural environment has major influences upon

the politics, and politics condition everyday life. Hence, the importance of changing cultural climate is clear, but how is one to do that? The grandfather of the narrator gave his opinion in the form of advice which is so cryptic that the narrator was almost haunted by its mystery throughout the whole book, and in the Epilogue gives the reader his final take on it, the most insightful on his part. And although the grandfather's advice is not explicitly mentioned in the Prologue, there are several points that hint at possible ways of comprehending it. In Chapter III of the present thesis the meaning of the advice will be discussed both by itself, and with application to the narrator's activity. The narrator did understand part of it, and yet it seems to imply more; and there is nothing strange in thinking that it is not impossible for the narrator to overlook something in his solution. The author keeps ironic distance, his character is not that insightful even after he has perceived his invisibility and developed the concept of it as such. That is why there is no wonder that the narrator writes that he wants to do something, to find the possibility for action, when he is doing something already, even while in "hibernation" he is not completely idle. He may not see it, but the reader may — and there are reasons to think that the reader's insight is even more important there: after all, the book is written to have an audience, and it is written with some purpose in mind. One may say that the purpose is clear, as it is stated in the Epilogue: to make democracy the aim, as well as social equality. Yet the question of how to achieve it still remains, and the narrator has no idea how to do it or, consequently, what to do as well. Chapter IV will deal with the purpose of writing an autobiography, since it is exactly what Invisible Man does, and with the role this type of narrative plays in African American tradition. With taking all these aspects into consideration, the goal of the present thesis is to show that, however unconscious of it, the narrator acts according to his democratic views and that by means of writing an autobiography he enters into such a dialogue with his readers that can help him in turning democracy and social equality from a dream into reality.

Chapter I

When the System Fails You: Civil Disobedience in *Invisible Man*

I. Civil Disobedience and African Americans

It is known that Richard Wright was the one who made Ralph Ellison turn to Henry James and Fyodor Dostoyevsky for guidance in the art of writing[1]. And the impact the latter had on Ellison is distinctly visible in the Prologue of *Invisible Man*: in its tone and in its setting it closely resembles Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, as Ellison himself admitted[2]. Invisible Man literally lives underground — in the basement of a building; but, whereas the narrator's life in *Notes from the Underground* is shown as pathetic and without any prospect, the description of Invisible Man's life indicates that his future is not as gloomy. Invisible Man himself calls his life underground a "hibernation", and his definition of it — "[a] hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action"[3] — suggests that he will eventually emerge, or at least that is his intent.

Of course, Invisible Man is not sleeping in his dwelling as animals do in actual hibernation. However much he himself insists that the moment for action is yet to come, it does not naturally mean that he cannot be already in the midst of some activity. The tone of the whole novel suggests that the narrator is not as insightful as he may think he is, even in the end of the novel; the author views his protagonist from an ironic distance and undoubtedly invites his readers to do the same. Hence it is reasonable to question if Invisible Man cannot be wrong in his description of his situation. Could it be that "the moment for action" has already "present[ed] itself"[4], and that Invisible Man, unbeknownst to himself, is already involved in this action?

In the Prologue there is a description of Invisible Man's "battle" against Monopolated Light & Power, from whom he draws electricity and uses it for illumination of his "hole". By the

[1] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995) 15.
[2] Robert O'Meally, Introduction, *New Essays on* The Invisible Man (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 10.
[3] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 15.
[4] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 15.

moment of writing the Prologue he has already wired the ceiling and started working on the wall, which in total gives 1,396 bulbs. He specifies that those bulbs are of the "more-expensive-to-operate"[5] type — yet he does not pay a cent for this, deliberately. And he is completely unapologetic about that: he feels justified by the fact that they "[took] so much of [his] money before [he] had learned to protect [himself]"[6]. At the very same time, he acknowledges that what he is doing is "[a]n act of sabotage"[7]: Could this be that very activity which he overlooks? After all, he puts so much effort into it, and it seems to mean a lot to him, since a substantial part of the Prologue is devoted to that "struggle". It is precisely this word and another one, "sabotage", that draw attention by their militant connotations and urge one to investigate Invisible Man's activity in the political and social context.

Why is one to delve into politics, especially when it is known that Ellison himself was opposed to viewing his work as a purely political or, for that matter, a "sociological case study"[8]? The answer is that avoiding politics completely in the discussion of African Americans of that period (or rather in their history as such) is impossible. Especially when the main message of the novel, expressed in the Epilogue, is about "the principle", that is democracy. The relationship between African Americans and democracy as it is conveyed in the Declaration of Independence, particularly in the words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"[9], has always been a complicated issue, both during the times of slavery and long after it was abolished. In the early 1950s, when *Invisible Man* was published, the doctrine of "separate but equal" was still in force, and that, among other essentially racist constraints, clearly affected life of the black population. And while there were people who docilely accepted the given

[5] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 10.
[6] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 10.
[7] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 10.
[8] O'Meally 5.
[9] *Declaration of Independence*, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html, 16 Apr 2016.

rules, there were also others who were so dissatisfied, to say the least, with the injustice of the rules imposed on them that they tried to change the situation.

Those people who deemed the state of affairs in the country unjust and wanted to tackle that issue put themselves into a difficult position. The US government had never renounced democracy as its central political doctrine; hence, to accuse the system of injustice may, in the minds of some people, equate to accusing American "democracy" itself of being an unjust doctrine. For an African American, a person whose ancestors were dehumanized property in chains, to deny the "three classical ideals closely associated with democracy — liberty, equality, and fraternity"[10] would be ludicrous. Yet the sense of the nominally democratic system malfunctioning pervaded the black community of the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1930s many joined the Communist Party, believing that its opposition to the established government would make a considerable impact and eventually lead to necessary changes. Indeed, the party managed to gain influence and supported its members of colour, but only up to a certain point — World War II. That was the reason why the so called Double V campaign was launched during the war: to fight racism not only in Europe, but on the home front too, since the communists had shifted the emphasis of their rhetoric to the national war effort, thus abandoning the black population. In September 1945, however, "the Double V insignia disappeared from [the Pittsburgh *Courier*, the paper where the concept originally appeared], replaced in 1946 by a Single V, indicating that more work combating antiblack racism needed to be done at home"[11]. Although in general the campaign did not achieve its ultimate goal, it still managed to make an important contribution — it "helped provide a voice to Americans who wanted to protest racial discrimination"[12].

[10] Carl Cohen, *Democracy* (The Free Press: New York, 1973) 273.
[11] Henry Louis Gates Jr., "What Was Black America's Double War?", p. 3, *The Root.com*, http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2013/05/double_v_campaign_during_world_war_ii_what_was_it.1.html , 26 Dec 2015.
[12] Gates Jr. 3.

In the end it turned out that African Americans had only themselves to rely on if they wanted to bring about some change. The question was by what means could they ever influence the current state of affairs. To do that through normal legal procedures seemed, at least to many outside of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.), to be of little use, for, as has already been said, the existence of democracy and equality were unquestionable "realities" of the current situation, at least in the eyes of the government and much of the white population. During World War II, it took the threat of a March on Washington in 1941 for the government to make concessions concerning African Americans' participation in the defense industry, however far from the ideal it was for the latter who were willing to engage in combat along with white soldiers but were usually "relegated to segregated divisions and combat support roles, such as cook, quartermaster and grave-digging duty"[13]. Yet that event, the March on Washington, is worth a closer look precisely because it managed to produce some effect, even without having taken place. In its essence, it was a mass action organized solely by blacks in order to claim their rights, — and that action was perceived as an act of nonviolent civil disobedience.[14] As it will be shown, it was exactly the practice of civil disobedience and militancy that appeared to be the only possible weapon in the fight against racial discrimination which is exemplified by several episodes in *Invisible Man* and in the "battle with Monopolated Light & Power" in particular.

Before giving concrete examples from the novel, it is necessary to go back to the problem of how accusations against the policies of a democratic government, which civil disobedience implies, go with democracy. Does not civil disobedience actually deny democracy? As Menachem Marc Kellner convincingly argues in his essay which deals exactly with these two concepts, a civil disobedient is the one who asserts the principles of democracy, not defies them. These principles are an aspired ideal; however, in reality, "democracies do not always

[13] Gates Jr. 1.
[14] Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cumberland: Harvard University Press, 2012) 204, *ProQuest Ebrary* http://site.ebrary.com/lib/cuni/reader.action?docID=10524466&ppg=8, 11 July 2016.

work as they were intended to work"[15]. Some people are either excluded from the governing process or are misled — and yet they are still "vitally affect[ed]"[16] by those policies. Clearly, people who are dissatisfied with the present state of things are supposed to make changes "*within* the law"[17], but it is precisely because these attempts are "thwarted or blocked that the civil disobedient is prompted to his action"[18]. The aim of civil disobedience is to oppose the government and not the principle, albeit it means that the principle of majority rule, essential to democratic policy, has to be violated. Yet for a true democrat that principle of majority rule (when decisions are made by the vote of the majority, and minorities have to yield) is not "an ultimate moral" one, for if they consider the majority to be mistaken, they are called to act, while accepting the punishment for violating this established principle, thus combining their respect for that principle and their commitment to democracy. Due to huge risks which civil disobedience thus carries for its user, the practice is indeed "almost always a counsel of last resort"[19] for people who are desperate to make themselves heard.

II. Civil Disobedience in *Invisible Man*

As has already been mentioned, Invisible Man was active even in his so called "hibernation", all the while genuinely believing he was doing nothing of any political and social importance. Yet in the description of his "fight with Monopolated Light & Power" he uses the phrase "[a]n act of sabotage". Stephen D'Arcy, a professor of philosophy and a long-time social activist, in his book *Languages of the Unheard: Why Militant Protest is Good for Democracy* lists sabotage as one of the possible applications of civil disobedience. To commit sabotage is an appealing tactic due to the fact that "[s]abotage can be carried out quite efficiently by a very small number of saboteurs, acting with little or no direction or co-ordination, and with a

[15] Menachem Marc Kellner, "Democracy and Civil Disobedience", *The Journal of Politics* 37.4 (1975): 902, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/2129181, 21 Mar 2015.
[16] Kellner 902.
[17] Kellner 903.
[18] Kellner 904.
[19] Kellner 910.

substantial prospect of successfully evading detection and prosecution"[20] — exactly as is seen in the Prologue to *Invisible Man*, for according to the protagonist, Monopolated Light & Power "suspect that power is being drained off, but they don't know where", they know only that "a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing somewhere into the jungle of Harlem"[21]. Through this activity Invisible Man conveys his defiance to the company: he claims they have taken too much from him when he was unable to stand up for himself — as if they virtually abused the power they had over him, in terms of such a simple thing as electricity. The whole situation suggests that people are being continually taken advantage of, completely unbeknownst to themselves, even on the level of daily life trivialities. What is then to be expected from political and social authorities?

The eviction scene in Chapter 13 where after the narrator's spontaneous speech the crowd attacks the officials who have evicted an old African American couple, is another example of civil disobedience at work which, in classification provided by D'Arcy, falls into the category of "disruptive direct action". Unlike "classical" civil disobedience, which tends to be non-violent, this type may resort to force if necessary. In the eviction scene there is a whole paragraph dedicated to the description of the fight[22]. That Invisible Man calls one of the officials "Mr Law"[23] is worth further discussion. When asking for permission for the old couple to go inside their former house and to pray, Invisible Man says to "Mr Law": "You got the world, can we have our Jesus?"[24] This question impressively summarizes to what extent African Americans are "dispossessed", as Invisible Man puts it: dispossessed of all the rights in the world and are now being denied even their faith, a thing inherently personal — all the

[20] Stephen D'Arcy, *Languages of the Unheard: Why Militant Protest is Good for Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2014) 105, *ProQuest Ebrary* http://site.ebrary.com/lib/cuni/reader.action?docID=10842787&ppg=8, 11 Apr 2016.
[21] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 9.
[22] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 227.
[23] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 226.
[24] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 226.

while being "a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people"[25]. This contrast of words on peacefulness of the people and their subsequent violent outbreak is particularly telling: the people's capacity for humble endurance is no more. They are not willing meekly to suffer (eviction in this particular case) or watch their fellows suffer, so when Invisible Man asked the crowd: "All we have is the Bible and this Law here rules that out. So where do we go?", a man answers simply: "We going after that paddie"[26] (meaning the official and notably using an ethnic slur), driving the crowd to the overt action of civil disobedience against the authorities.

Some pages before the fight, when Invisible Man had only just come to the scene of the eviction, he heard this dialogue between two other witnesses:

> 'Sho, we ought to stop 'em,' another man said, 'but ain't that much nerve in the whole bunch.'
>
> 'There's plenty nerve,' the slender man said. 'All they need is someone to set it off. All they need is a leader.'[27]

As it happened, they found their leader in Invisible Man who "[w]ith a few words [...] had them involved in action"[28] as Brother Jack says later, after having chased Invisible Man and eventually recruited him into the Brotherhood. The issue of leadership — or rather the lack of one — is crucial in the novel. Mary Rambo, an influential figure in her neighbourhood at whose place the narrator lives for some time, is described as gravely concerned about leadership and responsibility, and she hopes that Invisible Man will choose something that is "a credit to the race"[29] as his vocation. Ironically, Invisible Man has just given up on his dream of becoming an educator like Dr Bledsoe, his long-time role model: somebody of importance and power, the only person of colour Invisible Man knew at the time he attended college "who could touch a white man with impunity"[30]. Yet the authority Dr Bledsoe has is

[25] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 223.
[26] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 227.
[27] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 217.
[28] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 235.
[29] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 207.
[30] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 97.

gained solely through his outward humility and obedience to whites. He himself puts it very plainly: "I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around... Yes, I had to act the nigger!"[31] His action is purely submissive and egocentric; he has no concern about the future of his race: "I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am"[32], he says to Invisible Man. He simply does not believe in the possibility of change for the present state of affairs, he does not even care about that. Hence, to call him a leader would be a misnomer, especially when there is the figure of Ras the Exhorter (and later Ras the Destroyer), a black nationalist who is constantly provoking the public with his speeches (Invisible Man becomes a witness to one on his very first day in Harlem) and who sabotages the Brotherhood speeches later in the novel. Eventually Ras's hour of ostensible triumph comes when a race riot erupts in Harlem and he, "upon a black horse. A new Ras of haughty, vulgar dignity, dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain"[33] and with a shield in his hand, seizes the opportunity to clash with the authorities in an actual battle, crying to the looters around him: "Come jine with us to burst in the armoury and get guns and ammunition!"[34] Ras is the epitome of a militant leader, of one who is willing to undertake the most overt action to bring change — to physically fight for it, in this particular case, for rights of his people.

Yet for all his belligerent pomp Ras is not the one initiating the riot and he is not actually leading all the participants into the clash with police: the rioters are split and the riot is not in any way organized. The whole action is spontaneous, and that, according to D'Arcy, is an inherent feature of any riot: "individuals may join or leave the riot freely, animated by their own personal aims and priorities"[35] Ras's agenda is specifically to clash with the police; and even looters may be justified in their actions, since, as Martin Luther King Jr. put it: "property

[31] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 120.
[32] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 120.
[33] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 447.
[34] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 448.
[35] D'Arcy 141.

represents the white-power structure, which [rioters are] attacking and trying to destroy"[36]. During the riot Invisible Man joins a group of people who have an agenda of their own — to burn down the tenement building those people live in. The conditions of living there are so unbearable that they choose to become homeless by destroying it, which they do — to the utmost surprise on the narrator: "I was seized with a fierce sense of exaltation. They've done it, I thought. They organized it and carried it through alone; the decision of their own and their own action. Capable of their own action..."[37]

In the classification provided by D'Arcy, this race riot is a grievance riot which "recommends itself mainly as a potential remedy for [the] denial of voice [...] a refusal to be ignored, expressed as defiance of the authority of the established legal order"[38]. When a group is "unheard" by the authorities and thus cannot participate in establishing the prevailing order, so that their interests are also counted, they eventually "confront in the state and its legal regime not an expression of their autonomy as members of a self-governing political community, but an alien power that imposes laws from above, which they have no reason to regard as legitimate"[39]. And because rioting does, in fact, provide the opportunity to vividly demonstrate the dissatisfaction with the present order of things by defying that order, in the situation when access to all other, more peaceful, means of reconciliation has been denied, rioting may be justifiably deemed "an act of democratic protest"[40]. And to put the description of such a radical action at the end of the novel is to show how desperate the people has become. Even the need of a leader has suddenly disappeared: people have spontaneously decided to operate together instead, each member contributing in an equal measure to reach a common goal.

[36] D'Arcy 149.
[37] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 441.
[38] D'Arcy 153.
[39] D'Arcy 153.
[40] D'Arcy 145.

In *Invisible Man* Ralph Ellison portrays the ways African Americans tried to fight the injustice which surrounded them. He himself lived through those turbulent years of African American protests, and as an intellectual he could not possibly lack his own opinion on the matters. The fact that he chose to place the race riot at the very end of novel suggests his empathy with the despair of his people. But it was also during that riot that the narrator wound up underground, as if he was suggesting that civil disobedience, even of that scale and force, would not solve the problems African Americans faced. For this reason one should investigate if with his novel Ellison hints at any other means of coping with the injustices of racist society.

Chapter II

Not Physical but Symbolic Action: Eloquence in *Invisible Man*

I. Ellison and the Ends of Fiction

It is a well known fact that Ralph Ellison refused to view his novel *Invisible Man* as another protest novel, the thematic core of which would be the fight against injustices with which people of his race meet every day. As Ellison said it in his interview to *The Paris Review*, "I wasn't, and am not, primarily concerned with injustice, but with art"[1]. Yet at the very same time he proclaimed that he "recognize[d] no dichotomy between art and protest"[2], and that protest should not necessarily be based on race or class conflicts, but also on "the limitation of human life itself"[3]. In discussing the same matter in an essay called "The World and the Jug" Ellison wrote:

> protest is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before, or as protest against the human condition. If *Invisible Man* is even "apparently" free from "the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country," it is because I tried the best of my ability to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend [...] The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I *put* it there. [...] the book [...] is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself.[4]

In yet another essay of his, called "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity", Ellison explained why "[a]rt by its nature *is* social". Through his or her work any author is trying to transcend some personal problem of theirs. "To be effective", elements of reality are to be used and given some formal structure; they also would bear social meanings, "since individual's emotions are formed in society". On the same basis, the problems the author attempts to transcend via his or her work are formed in that same society, which makes a work of art closely intertwined with social protest of one kind or another.

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[1] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995) 169.
[2] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 169.
[3] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 169.
[4] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 137.

The main emphasis of many of Ellison's remarks on the subject of literature is on humanity and "moral searching" which, he believed, disappeared from American literature with the coming of the twentieth century. In his view, "humanity [...] involves guilt"[5], and the novels written in a naturalist tradition (like those of Ernest Hemingway) denied that characters bear any responsibility for their misfortunes, which automatically freed the characters of those novels from guilt. Even if there was some doubt on the part of the character, it was "almost always [focused] outward, upon some scapegoat with which he [the writer] is seldom able to identify himself as Huck Finn identified himself with the scoundrels who stole Jim and with Jim himself."[6] And since "[a]rtists such as Hemingway were seeking a technical perfection rather than moral insight"[7] (that perfection drawn from Twain's "technical discoveries" in *Huckleberry Finn*, among others) in the end there appeared literature of "a marvelous technical virtuosity won at the expense of a gross insensitivity to fraternal values"[8]. And as Ellison specified on the next page of the essay, "real fraternal [...] values" are "democratic".

That such disregard for democratic values was indeed present in the twentieth-century fiction (that is, the fiction up to the middle of the century when Ellison was expressing these ideas) was, in Ellison's view, most evident in the way the writers of that period treated African Americans in their works. They either "tend[ed] to ignore them" or "distorted Negro humanity to fit [their] personal versions of Southern myth". Whatever the case, African Americans were "seldom conceiv[ed to possess] the full, complex ambiguity of the human"[9], thus becoming a walking stereotype of "an oversimplified clown, a beast or an angel"[10]. In Ellison's view, such treatment was to free a white American from "personal responsibility for the health of democracy"[11] in the sense that "dehumanization" of African Americans would justify whites'

[5] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 179.
[6] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 35.
[7] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 38.
[8] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 35.
[9] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 25.
[10] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 26.
[11] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 28.

commonplace undemocratic treatment of them, thus solving the moral dilemma "arising between his democratic beliefs and certain undemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not"[12].

In contrast with the attitude of the twentieth-century writers towards African Americans, the writers of the nineteenth-century adhered to the "conception of the Negro as a symbol of Man", "a symbol of value" which came "with Rationalism and the rise of the romantic individual of the eighteenth century" that revolted against the established norms and tended to associate himself with the "noble slave" who "symbolized the darker, unknown potential side of his personality, that underground side, turgid with possibility"[13]. All of this is to be found in works of such prominent American writers of the nineteenth century as Mark Twain, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. Twain, whose work Ellison took as representative of his point in his essay, portrayed Jim as a human being who is ambiguous, "like all men", and who "expressed his essential humanity in his desire for freedom"[14].

It is then hardly doubtful that Ellison's aim in writing his novel was to depict African Americans as people of flesh and blood, not as cardboard figures driven solely by the conditions of their race (actual physical protest being one of the possible outcomes of such one-sided characterization). After all, as Ellison added to his appreciation of Twain's portrayal of Jim: "[Jim] is [...] limited in circumstance but not in possibility"[15]. In his own words, in his work Ellison set out to "describ[e] for all that fragment of the huge diverse American experience which [he knew] best, and which offer[ed him] the possibility of contributing not

[12] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 28.
[13] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 32.
[14] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 31.
[15] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 31.

only to the growth of the literature but to the shaping of the culture as [he] should like it to be"[16].

II. Electricity as a Symbol in the Prologue

Even though there is no exact date in *Invisible Man*, it is obvious that the action takes place in the twentieth century (based on the narrator's references to Louis Armstrong, for example). Bearing in mind the author's attitude towards the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one cannot ignore the description of Invisible Man's dwelling: "I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century"[17]. If to be read not literally, but symbolically (since the novel is heavily loaded with symbols), this detail suggests that the issue of African Americans was swept under the rug — "out of sight, out of mind" as the saying goes — at that point in history. Why "during" and not "after" the nineteenth century, since the latter would have been more consistent with Ellison's distinction discussed above? Most probably Ellison was referring to the time of Reconstruction which turned out to be a huge disappointment, if not to say a failure, for African Americans (as is it suggested at the beginning of the first chapter where Invisible Man's grandfather is cited). Furthermore, one of the key decisions of the U. S. Supreme Court concerning African Americans also took place at the close of the nineteenth century: *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the process that validated the "separate but equal" doctrine, thus heralding the twentieth-century literature's sentiment with its lack of "moral searching" and disdain for the black population.

The impact of the nineteenth-century culture is also to be seen in Invisible Man's "fight with Monopolated Light & Power" if one is to read it symbolically. After all, Invisible Man himself perceives the light which he draws from the company metaphorically: "The truth is

[16] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 183.
[17] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 9.

the light and light is the truth"[18]. Obviously, the author hinted at the concept of enlightenment: Ellison said in his interview that "the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment"[19]. It is also worth noting what the source of that light is — Monopolated Light & Power. Clearly, that company stands for the hegemony of whites in the US; yet it is possible for the outsiders to draw upon that power, and that without giving anything back, since the monopoly does not recognize those outsiders and thus, as one may suspect, does itself more harm than good by doing so. After all, the energy thus drawn by outsiders cannot be used openly and therefore prevents them from contributing to mainstream culture.

The ignored outsiders, on the other hand, despite their limited circumstances still can try to change their situation. Of course, first of all, they have to come to the realization that something is wrong, just as the narrator has understood that he is invisible. Through his wiring up the basement where he lives, he as if conveys this realization — and thus he makes himself visible: "Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. [...] Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death"[20]. It is of vital importance to possess that knowledge, that truth, of one's essential invisibility to society, because, as it is implied in the name of the company, with light (that is, with enlightenment) comes power.

It is no accident that Ellison chose electricity as the main symbol here; it is not only due to the fact that it actually brings light — fire as well could do in that case. But it is exactly electricity which requires "a certain ingenuity"[21] in a person, so that he or she may invent something; that inventiveness can also put a person "in the great American tradition of tinkers", to "make[him or her] kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin"[22] — whatever the colour of

[18] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 10.
[19] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 173.
[20] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 10.
[21] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 10.
[22] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 10.

their skin. The realm of ideas recognizes no racial distinctions; hence, it is the realm through which one may attempt to achieve equality in life. The appearance of the telegraph in the nineteenth century was accompanied by the hopes of spiritual unity of all people because the telegraph was a means of connecting minds (via words and, naturally, thoughts) regardless of bodies. Such "transmission of thought"[23] was to bring about equality, not only between blacks and whites but also between men and women — exactly thanks to its "negat[ing] the body as a marker of identity"[24], skin colour included.

Notably, Frederick Douglass, probably the most prominent African American figure of the antebellum United States, also participated in the general enthusiasm over the egalitarian potential of electricity in his anti-slavery argument[25]. As he argued in his speech on "The Present Condition and Future Prospects of the Negro People": "Men will write. Men will read. Men will think. Men will feel. And the result of all this is, men will speak. And it were as well to chain the lightning as to repress the moral convictions and humane prompting of enlightened human nature"[26]. In his view, as Paul Gilmore put it in his book *Aesthetic Materialism: Electricity and American Romanticism*, "[w]ritten language [...] can both capture and re-engage the sentiments, desires, and feelings that all humans share"[27].

That is what makes electricity important: not only its implications when viewed literally, but also when viewed metaphorically. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, after whom Ellison was named and of whom the African American writer was definitely well aware, wrote in his essay "Eloquence": "[The orator's] speech is not to be distinguished from action. It is the electricity of action."[28] Bearing in mind how the narrator defines himself in the Prologue: "I

[23] Paul Gilmore, *Aesthetic Materialism: Electricity and American Romanticism* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2009) 50, *ProQuest Ebrary* http://site.ebrary.com/lib/cuni/reader.action?docID=10329909&ppg=10, 11 June 2016.
[24] Gilmore 51.
[25] Gilmore 112.
[26] Gilmore 120.
[27] Gilmore 120.
[28] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Eloquence", *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* http://www.rwe.org/chapter-iv-eloquence, 9 June 2016.

am an orator, a rabble rouser — Am? I *was*, and perhaps shall be again"[29] — the relevance of electricity as a metaphor for the power of word becomes evident.

III. Ellison and the Power of Words

The extent to which Ellison was sensitive to how important the role of language is in our lives, is very well expressed in the first paragraph of the above discussed essay "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity":

> Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word. And by this I mean the word in all its complex formulations, from the proverb to the novel and stage play, the word with all its subtle power to suggest and foreshadow overt action while magically disguising the moral consequences of that action and providing it with symbolic and psychological justification. For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind, imprison and destroy.[30]

According to Robert O'Meally, a prominent scholar of Ellison's work, Ellison was greatly influenced by Kenneth Burke, a literary theorist whose works were mostly concentrated exactly on the potencies of language. And as O'Meally wrote, "[i]t's Burke who makes the key point that aside from its value as entertainment and escape [...], art offers people what he says language in general offers, namely, 'equipment for living'."[31] Furthermore,

> Burke declares that to make words is to take action in the world, that *language is symbolic action*. More than just a mental and emotional readying for action, literature presents its audience with specific inducements to act in certain ways: it 'advertises' a stance towards rottennesses in varied Denmarks. Burke: To make art or to be moved by it = to *act*.[32]

Once again, as in Emerson's essay cited above, words are linked to action, either in the form of speech or literature. And Ellison, in the Prologue to *Invisible Man*, suggests yet another potential for words. In his hallucinations Invisible Man meets an old black woman and asks her: "what is this freedom you love so well?" and her answer is "I guess now it ain't nothing

[29] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 15-16.
[30] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 24.
[31] Robert O'Meally, "On Burke and the Vernacular: Ralph Ellison's Boomerang of History", *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 245, *ProQuest Ebrary* http://site.ebrary.com/lib/cuni/Doc?id=10087193, 18 Mar 2015.
[32] O'Meally 245.

but knowing how to say what I got up in my head"[33]. Since that hallucination mirrors what is in Invisible Man's subconscious, it would be fair to say that he holds eloquence to be indispensable to freedom. By drawing on the light from Monopolated Light & Power and thus becoming enlightened, he acquires eloquence which is a key to his becoming an actually free individual — at least in the sense of not being blinded by what others say, but thinking for himself instead.

That was exactly the reason why Invisible Man was so unsuccessful in his past, while at the college or in the Brotherhood, even though he was considered a talented orator due to how well he handled words: "he define[d] his freedom and ambition in terms of public speaking, but [left] others to define language, leadership, and power"[34]. Not only his speeches but also his identity was assigned to him, not chosen by him. As Ellison said, "Each section [of the novel] begins with a sheet of paper; each [...] contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing, 'Keep this nigger boy running'"[35] (the complete phrase reads "Keep those Negroes running — but in their same old place", as Ellison revealed it in his 1981 Introduction to the novel[36]. The implication is imitation of progress instead of an actual progress of the people). In order to "have some voice in his own destiny"[37] and to choose his place in society on his own conditions, Invisible Man has to burn those papers, thus symbolically setting himself free from others' pervasive influence on his life. Yet the identity which he himself came up with — that of Invisible Man — is so personless, as if it were only transitory (apart from indicating that Invisible Man is everyman), just as his underground dwelling is only for hibernation.

While in hibernation, Invisible Man collects not only Light, but also Power — another highly important concept of the nineteenth century philosophy. In discussing that issue there

[33] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 13-14.
[34] John F. Callahan, "Frequencies of Eloquence: The Performance and Composition of *Invisible Man*", *New Essays on* The Invisible Man, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 69.
[35] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 177.
[36] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) xv.
[37] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 177.

seems to be no way of avoiding the figure of Ralph Waldo Emerson yet again, for "Power" is an ever present element of his work. The power he wrote of was not a mere physical force, but a capacity for creation, something possessed by the mind open to the world; and "the Poet", somebody who creates (from Greek *poetes* "maker"[38]), is an ideal. Here the imagery of electricity still proves to be suitable, because, as Paul Gilmore wrote: "Art, poetry, is electric, for it is 'never fixed, but always flowing'", citing Emerson's essay "Art". That is what power is required for: a poet needs it, so that he can perpetually reconstruct the world around him by constantly gaining more insight and thus changing his perception of the world. And it is exactly what Invisible Man was doing throughout the whole narrative: time and time again he gets deeper understanding of his situation by encounters with different people and their outlooks, — and eventually realizing his own invisibility.

As Ellison said, he worked with "the meanings which blackness and light have long had in Western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge, and so on"[39]. Naturally, that mythology found its way into language, one of the tools with which people construct the reality around them. Even the mere awareness of this fact may shed light upon relations between people and possible tensions: if black colour is strongly associated with evil in people's minds, then it seems natural that they treat people with such skin colour as suspicious, even though there is no real reason for that. Such is the power of words over people's minds (and myth is, of course, handed down by means of language) that old stereotypes embedded in it, though groundless, may shape the outside world and impact people's attitudes and actions. That is the very reason why words can be dangerous: such stereotypes "govern behavior [and] become social forms" that are "thoughtlessly accepted"[40]. When a whole group of people is thus deemed subordinate, democracy has no chance of being established.

[38] 'Poet', *Online Etymological Dictionary*, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=poet, 11 June 2016.
[39] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 173.
[40] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 174.

There are interesting dynamics that might be observed between eloquence and insight. As it has already been said, Invisible Man was good at handling words even when blind to his situation. Another such example would be Reverend Homer A. Barbee who gives a long exalted speech in chapter 5 of the novel. With his words he almost puts the audience into trance — including Invisible Man who says that, "[f]or a few minutes old Barbee had made me see the vision and now I knew that leaving the campus would be like the parting of flesh"[41]. The next moment Invisible Man finds out that the reverend is blind; at that point the implication of the reverend's lack of insight becomes symbolically clear. Other hints were to be found in Invisible Man's words of the start of Barbee's speech: "Then he was renewing the dream in our hearts"[42] — not something implying reality, but "the dream", something fabulous. Barbee's sincere praise of Dr Bledsoe, a two-faced opportunist, also adds to the point. On that account, his eloquence is dangerous, for with it he propagates views that are harmful from a democratic standpoint. In a novel that relies on symbolism so heavily, the reverend is blind not only as regards his physical sight, but regarding to his optimistic views, too. Blinded by his nostalgia, he sees no reason for a reformation of the contemporary society which badly needs changes. Still, he enjoys his success and most evidently has enormous influence on the minds of his audience.

A perfect contrast to Barbee is the veteran from the Golden Day. The reverend is famous, judging from the "look of annoyance, almost of outrage"[43] that the narrator is given when he asks who the orator is, whereas the veteran does not have his name mentioned in the novel (it is unclear if the narrator knows it at all). The veteran is definitely eloquent, but he is also insightful. Maybe that is the reason why his metaphor of sleepwalkers appears in the Prologue — it is so accurate and graphic that the veteran simply impressed it on Invisible Man's consciousness. And yet despite his eloquence, insight and his former experience as a talented

[41] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 112.
[42] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 100.
[43] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 104.

physician, the vet is kept in a mental asylum. The fact that he is not surprised and retains his dignity is also very telling. Firstly, thanks to his insight he feels himself to be a white man's equal, which may be seen in the way he deals with Mr Norton in the Golden Day: he "look[s] down [upon Mr Norton] unsmilingly", and that shocked the narrator so much that he panicked — "[m]en like us did not look at a man like Mr Norton in that manner"[44]. Yet the vet knows that he was not born with his knowledge: "Perhaps had I overheard some of what I'm about to tell you when I was a student up there on the hill, I wouldn't be the casualty that I am"[45]. He knows that now his own situation is helpless but still hopes that a better future is to come — and tries to aim it by his persuasive speech in front of a youngster (Invisible Man even thinks: "I wanted to tell Mr Norton that the man was crazy and yet I received a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man" — and he talked with "a freedom which could only bring on trouble"[46]). After all, being institutionalized, he has nothing else left; "the only violent thing about the vet was his tongue"[47], as Invisible Man notes in his second encounter with the veteran. The vet's words give him freedom even in his circumstances, whereas Barbee's eloquence imprisons the physically free reverend.

[44] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 77.
[45] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 78.
[46] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 80.
[47] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 126.

Chapter III

"Is You Ready to Commit Treason?": The Riddle of the Grandfather's Advice

Throughout the novel there are several people who offer Invisible Man some piece of advice as to what he should do (the aforementioned vet is among these people), but no advice haunts the protagonist more than that of his grandfather. In Ralph Ellison's own words the grandfather's deathbed advice is "sphinxlike"[1] in a sense that it "poses a riddle" for the narrator. Indeed, Invisible Man grapples with it throughout the novel, each time coming up with a new interpretation, all but the last one of them turning out to be misreadings that produce unfortunate consequences. Eventually, in the Epilogue, Invisible Man seems to solve the riddle. This is only logical because, from the narrational point of view, to leave it as it is would have been pointless: after being blind to his situation and thus wrong in his solutions of the riddle, the narrator simply has to be right in the end.

Put shortly, the solution reads as follows: "we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built [...] because [...] the principle was greater than [...] all the methods used to corrupt its name"[2]. Even though it is not named, it is clear that the principle implied is democracy. Invisible Man's final solution takes three unfolding readings of the principle and its place in solving another issue — the problem of African Americans' situation in the US. It is undoubtedly fair to say that Invisible Man was not the only one puzzling over the advice; numerous essays are dedicated to it and to the corresponding passages of the Epilogue. Strangely, the advice is rarely read by itself: mostly only as an indicator of the narrator's "current state of consciousness, [which] also, structurally, foreshadows plot development of the novel"[3] (as also pointed out by Ellison himself[4]).

The grandfather's words are as follows:

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[1] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995) 56.
[2] Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 462.
[3] Yanwei Hu, "'The End is in the Beginning': the Riddle and interpretation of Ellison's *Invisible Man*", *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4.9 (Sept 2014), *Literature Resource Center* http://dx.doi.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.4304/tpls.4.9.1829-1836, 16 Jan 2015.
[4] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 56.

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.[5]

One need not delve deeply into untangling the advice to see that its connotations are militant. Even the outwardly "meekest of men [...] who never made any trouble"[6] (as the narrator describes his grandfather) was defiant to his situation, however covertly. And yet he "does not approve of open warfare, violence, confrontation, to which the black radicals readily resort"[7]. What has to be done instead? The black people has to "tame" the white one, however risky this undertaking may turn out to be — such is the implication of the very circus-sounding phrase "[l]ive with [the] head in the lion's mouth"; the lion here is the white American population, which is obviously stronger. In order to do that, one has to become a spy, to put on a mask; to persuade the lion that he or she will not do any harm, quite on the contrary. Unfortunately, to become a successful spy, one has to give up his identity, not to let it show through. This is an existential problem in itself, as can be seen in the examples of Dr Bledsoe or Rinehart, both of whom mastered the art of masking. The wearing of masks, under whose guise may be hiding a hypocrite or nobody at all — the novel hardly praises such an approach to one's self. It seems that the grandfather knew it well and yet chose to sacrifice his identity.

Apart from a spy, there is another word in the advice that bears a militaristic meaning — "traitor". The question is: Traitor to what or whom? To his own people because in the end he gave up his gun? Or to whites because he pretended to support them but actually did not?

It is important to note that there are numerous references to treachery scattered in the novel. Emerson, Jr. calls his revelation of the nature of the "recommendation" letters, which Invisible Man brought, a treason to his, Emerson's, father — meaning, obviously, the idea of

[5] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 17.
[6] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 17-18.
[7] Hu.

white supremacy and keeping African Americans in the dark, so that it would be easy to manipulate them. Ras the Exhorter says that he is "no black traitor to the black people for the white people"[8] while talking to Invisible Man and Tod Clifton. Later in the novel, Tod Clifton himself is called "a traitorous merchant of vile instruments of anti-Negro, anti-minority racist bigotry"[9] by Brother Jack. During this conversation with Brother Jack, Invisible Man asks the question of the nature of treason: "Some folks call me traitor because I've been working downtown; some would call me a traitor if I was in Civil Service and others if I simply sat in my corner and kept quiet"[10]. And he also says that he heard the rumours that the Brotherhood's change in policy was perceived by the masses as betrayal.

Frequent references to treachery on the part of African Americans in relation to other African Americans suggest the disunity in their ranks. They all suffer in their current circumstances but at the very same time there is no policy to which they might stick to as a people. Even on the day to day basis they do not necessarily trust each other, envy is often present in estimation of some person, as well as sneering (Invisible Man feeling superior to the boys with whom he fought in the battle royal; his thoughts of "a glee [...] the certain folks at home would feel if [he] were expelled"[11] to name only few). But there is a contrast to that: the figure of Mary Rambo who is always willing to help, and who became an authority in her neighbourhood thanks to that quality. It was she who complained to Invisible Man that "[t]hat's what's wrong with the world today, don't nobody trust nobody"[12], pointing to the disunity within the community. Still, Invisible Man, being blind to the reality of his situation, later thinks: "there are many things about people like Mary Rambo that I dislike [...] they usually think in terms or 'we' while I have always intended to think in terms of 'me' [...]

[8] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 298.
[9] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 367.
[10] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 368.
[11] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 84.
[12] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 206.

Brother Jack and the others talked in terms of [...] a different, bigger 'we'"[13]. Invisible Man's disconnection with the people to which he belongs and with whom he shares the situation is part of his problem; only when he accepts his ancestry as a black man, does he see himself in that situation. After all, even though black people were to a great degree unified during Reconstruction regardless of all the differences in class or gender[14], the period turned out to be "a splendid failure", as W. E. B. Du Bois later called it[15]. Efforts of a shattered community will not deserve any approving epithet whatsoever, as the novel suggests: they will bring about nothing but simple failure.

The word "treason" is also used in the part of the book in which the present thesis is interested the most — the Prologue. In the hallucination sequence, Invisible Man, while listening to a sermon, hears a scream: "Git out of here, you fool! Is you ready to commit treason?"[16] In the next second he runs away, "hearing the old singer of spirituals moaning, 'Go curse your God, and die'"; when the narrator stops to find out what is wrong, the woman starts to talk about the love and hate she feels toward her master whom she killed because he had not kept his promise — to free her and their children. It seems that the "God" and master are the same person, and that the treason is to curse him.

The dynamics of these passages make a striking contrast with the preceding sermon on "the blackness of blackness", from which Invisible Man eventually runs away. By its name and the phrase "[black]'ll put you [...] in the WHALE'S BELLY", it clearly alludes to the sermon Ishmael accidentally witnesses in the second chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Notably, the preacher there was called "a black Angel of Doom"[17] by Ishmael. Everything that is described in this sequence seems to pose a threat to the white supremacy,

[13] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 256.
[14] Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005) 163.
[15] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935) 708, *Internet Archive* https://archive.org/details/blackreconstruc00dubo, 7 June 2016.
[16] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 13.
[17] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or The Whale*, p. 35, *Planet PDF* http://www.planetpdf.com/planetpdf/pdfs/free_ebooks/moby_dick_t.pdf, 8 Oct 2015.

and that is what the treason refers to: Invisible Man — as well as his readers — should "betray" the ideals and stereotypes of the white majority, "to affirm the principle [...] and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence"[18] — that is, masters of whom the old woman in the hallucination speaks. But "the principle" is more of an aim than the actual tactics, and in his advice the grandfather talked exactly of tactics. Of course, he himself failed to achieve democracy; that is why the advice is "a parody of itself"[19], meaning that the grandfather advises masking while regretting that he wore one all his life and his efforts were fruitless. And yet in Invisible Man's situation there are facts that hint at his implementing of the advice, albeit differently from his ancestor, which is only natural, since, as one critic rightly pointed out, it would be a mistake to view the grandfather and Invisible Man as one person, because it would deprive them of their individualities[20]. Invisible Man's blackness has already put him in the underground belly — not that of a lion, but of a whale, as the sermon goes; the allusion to the white whale of the American canon can only add to the symbol of white superiority. Invisible Man lives there because he refuses to conform to the stereotypes imposed on him by the society, and so it is as if he is betraying that society. This is what he means while talking about his social irresponsibility in the closing passages of the Prologue: "to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? [...] Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement"[21]; instead of agreement he has somebody else's rules imposed upon him without his participation in formulating these rules. Towards the end of this passage he provides his readers with another take on irresponsibility. Talking of the fight with a white man at the very beginning of the Prologue, he says "I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society". Although he talks of violence, he does not resort to it in the end;

[18] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 462.
[19] Joseph F. Trimmer, "The Grandfather's Riddle in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*", *Black American Literature Forum* 12.2 (Summer, 1978): 46, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041594, 16 Jan 2015.
[20] Hu.
[21] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 16.

the harshness of his words talks more of his despair than actual malignity. Most importantly, in this somewhat unconscionable manner he suggests protecting democracy from people who do not follow its actual principles of equality.

Which leads to a discussion of another aspect of the advice — the one which concerns masking — and how Invisible Man implements it. On the one hand, the narrator does wear a mask — one of invisibility. On the other hand, his mask is essentially also everybody else's: it stands for the humanity which we all share regardless of race, gender, age, class or nationality. In this respect Invisible Man's mask tears off all the possible masks; thus he also becomes a traitor in the land of those who hide behind masks and put them on other people. Of course, in order to do that Invisible Man has to suppress his personality, but at the very same time his mode of doing that, unlike that of his grandfather, does not suppress his humanity. On the contrary, by writing an anonymous autobiography, Invisible Man affirms everybody's humanity, because society seems to have forgotten about that.

This is the essential act of his treason against a society blind to the individuals that compose it — his autobiography. He writes it while dwelling underground: he has been chased there, as if eaten by a beast, and now he is trying to irritate the beast's stomach with his writing, so that it cannot simply digest him, as if he were nothing. By doing that, Invisible Man follows his grandfather's advice, albeit in a somewhat unconventional way, and, most importantly, without sacrificing his own identity.

Chapter IV

"What about Us": The Function of Autobiography

I. "Is You Ready to Commit Treason" — to Yourself?

There is also another aspect to Invisible Man's carrying out of his grandfather's advice, apart from striving for democracy. It is importance of one's legacy and its acceptance. By following his grandfather's instructions, Invisible Man valorizes the experience of previous generations along with their contribution to the common cause.

To speak in terms of generations is by no means an over-generalization. Invisible Man writes an autobiography — a narrative of his life — and that type of writing was prominent in the nineteenth century when the issue of the wrongs of slavery gradually pervaded American social debate and eventually influenced the politics. So called "slave narratives" were used by abolitionists to show the general audience, particularly the Northerners, how drastic the conditions of slavery were, in order to gain some support. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, is undoubtedly the most famous of such texts. Douglass is also mentioned in *Invisible Man*; as one critic puts it, "Douglass is the book's only undiminished historical image of knowledge and power humanely united"[1], a reason good enough to examine the meaning of his figure for the novel in more depth. Brother Tarp hangs Douglass's portrait in Invisible Man's office, and the narrator says that he knows who Douglass is, that his grandfather spoke of the abolitionist. Notably, at the stages when he is still blind, Invisible Man pays more attention to Douglass's career, to "how magical it was that he had talked his way from slavery to a government ministry, and so swiftly"[2]. Of course, that is not the message sent to the world by the slave narrative: "Douglass's power was bound up with the personal, racial, national cause of

[1] John S. Wright, "The Conscious Hero and the Rites of Man: Ellison's War", *New Essays on* The Invisible Man, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 173.
[2] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 308.

freedom and justice"[3]. Eventually, Invisible Man joins Douglass, even if unconsciously, when he turns to the same means of expressing his concerns. Such connection to an African American tradition of autobiographies and biographies (which continued well into the twentieth century) points out not only to the existence of a common cause but also urges people to unite in the fight for that cause, not to forget that they are a group, a community.

Yet in discussing purposes of this type of writing there is an issue not less important: "Although these earlier texts [slave narratives] were written, at least in part, to generate funds for and interest in the abolitionist cause, they also enabled the writers to name themselves before a culture that had denied their full humanity"[4]. The search of identity unfolds thus not only on the level of a people but also on the level of an individual. Even more than that, an individual may have never thought of having an identity, never paid any attention whatsoever to his or her own self, all the while listening to what others, be it masters or society as such, impose on that individual. Thus a self-narrative, which autobiography essentially is, becomes a means of self-assertion and self-affirmation.

The grandfather's advice, when looked at from this perspective, suggests another meaning. As already said, the grandfather was unhappy with sacrificing his identity, and that is a crucial flaw in his tactics. To be a successful spy means to be able to merge with the enemy's society and to look constantly into other people's lives — which implies giving up on one's self. That is what is treacherous in this approach, betrayal of the self, — at least in terms of a novel which estimates individuality at a high value. Thus, treachery may be read on the level of personality, not on that of society. Similarly, Mary Rambo's words, "that's what's wrong with the world today, don't nobody trust nobody" can be read that people also don't believe themselves, not only each other.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous instruction "trust thyself" from his essay "Self-Reliance"

[3] John F. Callahan, "Frequencies of Eloquence: The Performance and Composition of *Invisible Man*", *New Essays on* The Invisible Man, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 74.
[4] Valerie Smith, "The Meaning of Narration", *New Essays on* The Invisible Man, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 27.

immediately comes to mind, and not accidentally, for Ellison was certainly acquainted with the works of the man after whom he was named. This assumption is, of course, more soundly based: in his letter to Alan Nadel, who wrote a study of the use of American authors in *Invisible Man*, he "cautions that he was not satirizing Emerson's 'oracular stance' but rather 'some of the bombast that has been made of his pronouncements'"[5], which suggests his deeper understanding of Emerson's philosophy. As James M. Albrecht in his book on individualism that concerns both Emerson and Ellison, convincingly argues, Ellison accepted some of Emerson's principles while at the very same time he developed them, being influenced by Kenneth Burke, in a more overtly politicized manner.

In terms of the novel, the doctrine of self-reliance, of trust to one's self, becomes crucial. Only then can a person start to articulate his or herself actively and this is a matter of utmost importance for both Emerson and Ellison. One must be able to constantly construct and reconstruct the world around — by means of rhetoric, of course. If one does not do so, the others will do that for them; this is exactly what happens with African Americans, at least as it is portrayed in the novel. Conventionally, black people were associated with evil due to the colour of their skin, starting with the first visits of Englishmen to Africa[6]. Eventually, African Americans regarded those with lighter skin as superior. In his interview Ellison himself gives a similar example: "there is the old saying amongst Negroes: If you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right"[7]. He consciously works with these conventional stereotypes of the Western culture and turns them inside out, thus stressing that language is fluid, it is only means to express oneself, it is never definite. If people are aware of that, it is harder to manipulate them by those means, as well as it is easier for them to work on their own constructions of identity and reality.

[5] James M. Albrecht, *Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatic Tradition from Emerson to Ellison* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012) 284-5, ProQuest ebrary http://site.ebrary.com/lib/cuni/reader.action?docID=10539026, 11 July 2016.
[6] Eric Foner, ed., *America's Black Past: A Reader into Afro-American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 51.
[7] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995) 173.

At the same time, it would be unfair to say that Invisible Man propagates pure individualism. Ellison was too well aware of the fact that "[a]s cultural beings, our dependence on inherited ideas and tools is so profound that even our efforts to reform or transcend traditional constructs must make use of tradition"[8]. That dependence may limit one's range of opportunities in some way, but, as Emerson argues in his essay "Fate", limitations only stimulate one's intellect and ingenuity. Moreover, "[i]t is against the resistances of our environment that we know and develop our individuality"[9]. Clearly, by environment he means not only biology or climate: "perhaps his central insight, and preoccupation, is that our acts and even our perceptions depend on what he often calls 'history' or 'society' — in short, on language"[10].

Chapter II of the present thesis has already dealt with the issue of eloquence and power of words in more detail. Most importantly, it is linked with freedom which is defined by the woman from the hallucination as "knowing how to say what I got up in my head"[11]. Foremost, it is a personal matter, a matter of identity, of self-expression.

II. A Plunge out of History

In chapter 20 of the novel, right after Tod Clifton is shot dead by a policeman, there is a striking image of three zoot suiters, "their black faces secret"[12], "communicating ironically with their eyes"[13]. For Invisible Man they are a puzzle; they seem to bear a cryptic message. Moments before noticing them, Invisible Man thinks of Tod Clifton: "Why should a man deliberately plunge outside of history [...] Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to 'define' himself?"[14] (meaning the Brotherhood). As Invisible Man himself is taught in the organization, "All

[8] Albrecht 289.
[9] Albrecht 289.
[10] Albrecht 290.
[11] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 14.
[12] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 354.
[13] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 356.
[14] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 353.

things, it is said, are duly recorded — all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies their keepers keep their power by"[15].Yet what about those silent crowds that fill the metro station where Invisible Man is, that fill the city, the country, the world? On what basis are their lives deemed unimportant for history?

Indeed, everything is a matter of attitude. Probably, that is why the zoot suiters are so contended with their being outside of "the groove of history", at least apparently contended, given their relaxed behaviour. The narrator imagines that "the boys speak a jived-up transitional language [...] think transitional thoughts, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dreams"[16]. Yet those are only the narrator's musings; he supposes that Tod Clifton would have known the boys better, but again, it is only an assumption. What actually is on the minds of the boys is unknown.

The choice of a symbol for "men out of time" is not accidental. In the late 1930s and early 1940s many young people, especially those from ethnic and racial minorities, sported the zoot suit. Eventually a politicized fashion item, at its very beginnings it was seen purely as a style in no way linked to "deliquency, violence, or the estrangement of young men of color"[17]. Prior to the infamous riot in June 1943, "it did not yet carry political charge, not with a degree of consciousness to be associated with the term 'political'"[18]. Interestingly, Ralph Ellison himself "pointed to the zoot suit as one of the many 'myths and symbols which abound the Negro masses' and offered clues to the state of black America, a puzzle the political class needed to decipher"[19], and that was months before the Los Angeles riot. The zoot suit was, first of all, a means to self-expression. Perhaps, that is what drawn Ellison's attention to the style and served a reason to use it as a symbol for "the [possible] saviors, the true leaders, the

[15] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 353.
[16] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 355.
[17] Kathy Peiss, *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) 76, ProQuest ebrary http://site.ebrary.com/lib/cuni/reader.action?docID=10641566, 11 July 2016.
[18] Peiss 71.
[19] Peiss 2.

bearers of something precious"[20]. The style "broadcast a self-conscious sense of difference from the conventional mode of respectable male appearance"[21], apparently because that youth did not feel respected and thus went against the conventions. "Against privation and despair [of the Depression era] came a range of inventive cultural responses"[22], since there was no other opportunity to react. As S. I. Haywaka put it, the zoot suit worked "as a symbol of the dash and glory these young people would LIKE to have, but CANNOT GET. And because these kids don't belong anywhere in our society, it is there symbol of belonging at least to the society of their own creation"[23]. This ingenuity in the realm of culture corresponds with the Emersonian notion of power in a certain way, along with the fact that the zoot suiters are young (youth being a metaphor for a period of creativity). That the style is transitional also adds to this vein because it suggests fluidity that is crucial to creativity which implies response to constantly changing environment.

Yet the zoot suiters seem to live in a world different from that of the narrator, and that fact is troubling, for it again speaks of disunity among people. Clearly, in a real world there will always be conflicts of interests, since everybody has different strivings. "In Emerson's vision, the healthy community would be one in which active individuals would inspire and antagonize each other through their diverse activities"[24]. Burke develops this idea, "argu[ing] that an individualist ethics must include more directly political gestures of communication and self-analysis". By that he means that "the ethics of an activity cannot be measured solely by an individual's intentions or competence: 'one's morality as a specialist cannot be allowed to do duty for one's morality as a citizen'"[25] (a clear example of contradiction between these two moralities is a scientist constructing a weapon of mass destruction). Feeling responsible for the well-being of one's self should go hand in hand with social responsibility, since

[20] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 355.
[21] Peiss 17.
[22] Peiss 45.
[23] Peiss 145.
[24] Albrecht 291.
[25] Albrecht 291.

humans are social by nature. Communication should therefore be established and everybody should have a voice. Otherwise society is impoverished because a group of people cannot or is not willing to engage in society's advancement.

III. Recording Voices

At Tod Clifton's funeral an old man starts singing "There's Many a Thousand Gone", a song from the slave times, and the people who gathered there join in regardless of the color of their skin. Symbolically, they go slowly up the hill. "Something deep [has] shaken the crowd. [the song has touched] upon something deeper than protest, or religion"[26]; it is "as though [the man has] changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sound[s] above, now deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood [has given Invisible Man] no name"[27]. In the end, the narrator sees "not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women"[28].

This procession and the impact it has on Invisible Man resonates with the following lines in the Prologue: "So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak"[29]. In a novel which pays so much attention to individuals, it is clearly a metaphor for a society in harmony with itself. Sound and voice become the focus because they are the ultimate realization of eloquence. In such a difficult situation, somebody's cry out loud requires some response because it breaks the silence of status quo.

That is what Invisible Man does with his autobiography — he records his voice. He expresses himself, which is action on his behalf, as already discussed. He eventually understood that it was his experience, his past, including mistakes and humiliations, that

[26] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 364.
[27] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 365.
[28] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 370.
[29] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 11.

defined him, not "Jack and Norton and Emerson [who] merge[d] into one single white figure [...] each attempting to force his picture of reality upon [the narrator]"[30]. As Kenneth Burke argued, an enlightened stance towards people is that they are "necessarily mistaken" and not "necessarily vicious"[31]. Only through accepting that notion can people develop tolerance towards each other, towards their occasional blindnesses and conflicts — none of which degrade anybody's humanity. Such tolerance, such awareness is the only way to make people genuinely listen to each other and to overcome major conflicts. According to Burke, "we must 'identify' with others across social divisions, while also confronting how our own position may 'identify' us with divisive social forces"[32]. Clearly, before a person identifies with others, they should discover their own identity first and build their own picture of the world.

> Individuality, in its fullest sense, is not simply the sheer fact of personhood, but a quality of selfhood to be achieved — the successful cultivation of a self that realizes an individual's gifts. [...]Providing individuals opportunities to cultivate their most vital selves is a primary moral standard by which a democratic society should be judged, and the diverse capacities of individuals provide elements of insight, imagination, initiative, and conscience necessary to revitalize a group's endeavors and remake its customs.[33]

Invisible Man's gift is his eloquence and his autobiography is his contribution to the society. The text he composes in his underground dwelling is a record of "one, and yet many"[34] experiences of what it means to be a human being. Apparently, due to the complicated system of society people simply forgot that they share the main thing — their humanity, and that everything else is a matter of accidental circumstance. In this way Invisible Man is right when he supposes that on the lower frequencies, on a deeper level, he speaks for everybody with his autobiography, providing everybody with a voice.

[30] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 409.
[31] Albrecht 293.
[32] Albrecht 293.
[33] Albrecht 307.
[34] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 465.

Conclusion

In the phantasmagoria of the Prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* there is a striking image of society as if being composed of sleepwalkers. In the protagonist's words they are dangerous — but in what sense? Since the image is most probably connected to the vet's speech, they "learned to repress not only [their] emotions but [their] humanity"[1]. Otherwise how could it be possible that there are people like Invisible Man among them, that is people whom they do not see? They walk in their American dream of equality, freedom and happiness, completely unaware of the reality, of the actual state of things. And for some that reality is a nightmare.

As Ralph Ellison wrote in one of his essays: "the penalty of wakefulness is to encounter ever more violence and horror than the sensibilities can sustain unless translated into some form of social action"[2]. This is what the protagonist of his novel eventually does. In the artistic form of autobiography he defines himself by using eloquence; he provides voice for himself and at the very same time he provides voice for many others who are as invisible. Since art is social by its nature, Invisible Man's memoirs may be viewed as an act of civil disobedience. He claims back the right to articulate his worldview with his own words, at the same time as he proclaims that everyone's worldview is equally valid, however different they are, for "diversity is the word"[3].

Invisible man disobeys the society of white political hegemony. He disobeys those who abuse the principle of democracy. For him, democracy is an ever evolving social system, in which everybody participates by recognizing everybody else's humanity (including one's own), and thus inevitably do their best to provide them with opportunities to realize their possibilities in the best way for the society to function. Of course, it is only an ideal image of a state — and yet it does not mean that it is not worth attempting to achieve it.

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[1] Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 81.
[2] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995) 92.
[3] Ellison, *Invisible Man* 465.

As James Albrecht writes:

> A recurrent theme in Ellison's work is that if America is ever to fulfill its democratic promise, individuals will need to recognize more fully how they are connected to each other — both by the social relations of inequality that create conflict, and by the shared democratic ideals that might spur us to remedy those inequities.[4]

The purpose of the novel is for its audience to wake up to that fact, otherwise one people will continue to live in two different, not to say segregated, worlds. An autobiography asserts its author's humanity, making its reader sympathize with the author. And although the narrator does get out of his underground hole, as suggested by Ellison[5], he is still in the hole of his invisibility. The reader's role is laconically conveyed by Marjorie Pryse: "We let him out, because we put him in. And we do the same for ourselves"[6], all that by taking responsibility for changing reality for the better.

In that respect, the Prologue, with its description of the fight against Monopolated Light & Power and of the hallucination sequence, works as a key to a novel, in which language is immensely important for individuals to define themselves and their place in the world and for establishing relationships between individuals. If that language, the public rhetoric, is somehow monopolized, then part of the population will become invisible, and eventually society as a whole will sink into the hole of political paralysis and dysfunction. In fact, the protagonist does get there, but in the end, by his creative effort, he manages to disrupt that unhealthy order. From his underground dwelling he manages to reach his own and others' deepest "frequencies" of humanity and shake people to wakefulness. Or at least he tries to do so; if his attempts are not successful, he is not bitter about others' blindnesses because his experience has taught him that everybody may be mistaken — and that is essential to our humanity which he now values above everything else, and so should we.

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[4] Albrecht 307.
[5] Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 179.
[6] Marjorie Pryse, "Ralph Ellison's Heroic Fugitive", *American Literature* 46.1 (Mar, 1974): 2, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/2924120, 16 Jan 2015.

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